

New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1957

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Rachel W. Coffin, Editor

Week of November 4, 1957

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NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Jamaica"

DAILY NEWS

November 1, 1957

'Jamaica' Has Horne, Needs Plot

By JOHN CHAPMAN

The friends of Lena Horne, including myself, gathered at the Imperial Theatre last evening to applaud one of the loveliest and most stylish of our present-day singers in a musical called "Jamaica." We were not let down by Miss Horne or by a supporting cast which includes Josephine Premice, Adelaide Hall and Ricardo Montalban, for their work is splendid and their show is handsome. But somewhere between the British West Indies and the workshop of the librettists, E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy, the story got lost.

The result is a musical without a plot. Lacking an interesting story, it becomes a series of musical numbers by Harold Arlen, all of which are in the calypso mood. They are, many of them, good numbers with bright lyrics, but there is a sameness to their form and beat which makes them

wearisome to me. Before the evening ended I was longing to hear just one fragment of another kind of native music—the stuff turned out by the crazy tribe which inhabits Tin Pan Alley.

Social Lesson

"Jamaica" has been handsomely located on a West Indian island by scenic artist Oliver Smith, and the natives have been costumed by Miles White. Miss Horne is a girl on the island and Montalban is a bare-chested boy. That is about all there is to the plot, except that a hurricane strikes the islet and the inhabitants discover that a fish to eat is worth more than a pearl to wear. Indeed,

there is more social significance than sexual significance in "Jamaica"—and this is doing a musical plot the hard way.

Miss Horne is splendid, having a way with a song that no other singer can duplicate. She puts humor into a satirical number about modern living, "Push the Button," sexy insinuations into "Take It Slow, Joe" and a whole editorial into a number which, reminding us that fame is fleeting, begins by pointing out that Napoleon is now a pastry.

Miss Premice, a very funny woman, puts over a number called "Leave the Atom Alone" with philosophical relish. Ossie Davis is amusing as an ambitious islander, and there is a charming performance of a small boy by a charming small boy, Augustine Rios. One dance, staged by Jack Cole, has simple beauty.

I just wish they hadn't lost the plot.

"JAMAICA"

Musical in two acts and seventeen scenes with book by E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy; lyrics by Mr. Harburg; staged by Robert Lewis; designed by Oliver Smith; costumes by Miles White; orchestrations by Philip J. Lang; lighting by Jean Rosenthal; musical direction by Lehman Engel; dance music and additional vocals by Peter Matz; choreography by Jack Cole; presented by David Merrick at the Imperial Theatre, October 31, 1957. The cast:

Koll.....Ricardo Montalban
Quico.....Augustine Rios
Savannah.....Lena Horne
Grandma Obeah...Adelaide Hall
Ginger.....Josephine Premice
Snodgrass.....Roy Thompson
Hucklebuck.....Hugh Dillworth
Island Women...Ethel Ayler and Adelaide Boatner
The Governor.....Erik Rhodes
Cicero.....Ossie Davis
Lancaster.....James E. Wall
1st Ship's Officer...Tony Martinez
2nd Ship's Officer...Michael Wright
Joe Nashua.....Joe Adams
Dock Worker....Allen Richards
Radio Announcer...Alan Shayne

Journal American

November 1, 1957

Lena + Music = A Big Winner

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE are varying degrees of worship for Lena Horne, from the sublime to the ecstatic, and she justified all of them last night in "Jamaica," the new musical which opened at the Imperial Theatre. This Caribbean extravaganza, with music by Harold Arlen and lyrics by E. Y. Harburg has style and pace; the music is magnificent and the choreography by Jack Cole is a crashing delight. The book is a large nunk of nothing, but who cares? There is Miss Horne.

She emerges from a squalid fisherman's hut early in the proceedings, and there is rarely a moment thereafter in which she is not visible and busy. By my count she delivers 11 numbers, in a magnitude of manners, and she will have to rank as our top song stylist today until we uncover a reasonable facsimile.

The procedure with "Jamaica" was quite obviously a frank demotion of story to give free reign to the score of Arlen

and Harburg, and the talents of the star. It is the flimsiest little tale of a native girl in love with a fisherman who

nearly loses herself with a big spender intent upon taking her to New York.

It is trivial and often ridiculous, but it supplies a colorful locale, and Oliver Smith has done well with the highly mobile sets. There is the transition from "Pigeon Island" to a New York night club, capped by Miss Horne's great rendition of "Take It Slow, Joe" that makes the entire evening memorable.

Co-starred with her is Ricardo Montalban, a vigorous and facile performer with an engaging voice. This show is full of music and he scores solidly with "Incompatibility" "Pity the Sunset", "What Good Does

It Do?" and "Monkey in the Mango Tree".

Then there is Adelaide Hall, a veteran of the early "Blackbird" revues and now a comfortable matron. The voice is still there and she makes it count in "Cocoanut Sweet", a lovely ballad which Lena later reprises.

Josephine Premice has a raffish and truly hilarious role as the island tart, and she is given full liberty to unveil her comedic talents with "Leave the Atom Alone", in the Second Act. Augustine Rios, a sprout, is both an accomplished actor and singer; and there are other bright contributions by Joe Adams, Ossie Davis and Erik Rhodes.

"Jamaica" is by no means in the same ocean with "South Pacific", but is sure to be a big winner. The music is always compelling, sometimes magical; and I believe many of the numbers will plague us for months to come.

The show is speedy and sumptuous, and it is certainly a more-than-adequate vehicle for the many-splendored Miss Horne. The class is dismissed with the promise that anybody playing hooky to see "Jamaica" will not be punished.

The New York Times

November 1, 1957

The Theatre: 'Jamaica'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

NO one associated with "Jamaica" has anything in mind except an evening's entertainment. Since everyone of them is not only talented but jubilant, the Negro musical show that opened at the Imperial last evening is delightful.

Having gotten "Finian's Rainbow" out of the way, E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy have now slipped down to the West Indies, taking Harold Arlen along to write the tunes. The climate is thoroughly agreeable. For it gives Mr. Arlen an opportunity to add calypso to the blues, and it gives Lena Horne a number of opportunities to make songs strut, snarl, croon, laugh and rhapsodize.

For a number of years she has been hiding her talent in supper clubs. It is out in the open now. For Mr. Arlen has written her quite a fat album of stuff, some of it in native styles, but a good deal of it sophisticated.

Miss Horne is a handsome young lady with delicate features, elegant manners and a wonderful glow, to say nothing of a rich singing voice. "Push the Button," which is a droll satire on mechanical civilization; "Take It Slow, Joe," "Aint It the Truth" and "Napoleon," which is another satire, are songs that know that they have been sung by the time Miss Horne gets through with them.

"Jamaica" is a beautiful, jovial, old-fashioned musical comedy that has been pro-

duced and staged with taste and style. There is no more glorious region for scenic décor. Oliver Smith has taken full advantage of it in romantic scenery bathed in luscious light by Jean Rosenthal. And Miles White has run up a series of costumes that are both stunning and gay.

You may not be passionately interested in the plot that Mr. Harburg and Mr. Saidy have knocked together. They are primarily interested in getting the performers on and off the stage, and they have succeeded admirably.

In addition to Miss Horne, the performers include Ricardo Montalban, an animated singer with a good sense of humor; Josephine Premice, whose loose, slatternly, saucy comedy is original and entertaining; Adelaide Hall, a singing lady who respects a piece of music; Ossie Davis, who knows how to underline a comic phrase and make it sound hilarious, and Augustine Rios, who is only 10 years of age but already has a wide range of musical-show talent.

Since the musical stage has

consciously become an art form in the past decade, it is difficult now for comedy writers to put together an unpretentious show without being hackneyed. There seems to be no middle ground between the artists and the mechanics. But "Jamaica" has found the middle ground and cultivated a holiday spirit around it.

Jack Cole's choreography is expert and colorful without pretending to be ballet. Philip J. Lang's witty orchestrations do no smother the audience with imposing sounds; and Lehman Engel conducts the orchestra and the singers cheerfully. As the lyric writer, Mr. Harburg has not tried to dazzle anyone, in particular. His rhyming style is relaxed and genial.

Everyone is in a pleasant mood because everyone is the master of his genre and does not feel under the necessity of proving it. Mr. Arlen seems to be writing tunes at leisure, and Miss Horne sings them without feeling that she must sell them.

It is professional work in every department and most enjoyable, too.

Herald Tribune

November 1, 1957

FIRST NIGHT REPORT WALTER KERR'S REVIEW 'Jamaica'

"JAMAICA" is the kind of musical that leads you to wonder whether it was produced simply because all concerned had such high, happy hopes for the original-cast album.

The concert at the Imperial doesn't really seem to have much else in view. The curtain goes up on some agreeably modest mango-trees cozily arranged by Oliver Smith. Out of the wings, with a net full of fish, comes bronzed and bare-footed Ricardo Montalban, ready to serenade his lady with a light and rippling "Savannah" (that's her name, as you'll be hearing from lyric to lyric).

With a sudden clatter of shutters and a sunburst of a smile Lena Horne has bolted into the bright island lights. Miss Horne is going to sing, too—with a wrinkle of her nose, a flicker of her wonderful cat's-whisker eyebrows (why do her eyebrows look like cat's whiskers?), and a positively

mesmerizing sunny good will.

She is going to sing about how a girl is "Pretty to Walk With" (there's no prettier living proof of the notion than Miss Horne), about how she'd like to go to New York where you "Push the Button" and everything happens, about the sweetness of coconuts and the "tangerine air," and about how Napoleon isn't much these days except a pastry.

As she sings, she is going to make you forget that she has a very small voice for a very big theater, and that she is being put to work every minute on the minute to keep the dialogue from intruding more than two lines at a time. Miss Horne is, at a most modest estimate, an enchantress. She stands lithe as a willow at the center of the stage, sucks in her breath as though she were inhaling a windstorm, and coos out the most improbable series of mating-pigeon sounds. I can't tell

you why her "Take It Slow, Joe" arches over the auditorium like a long, taut faintly quivering suspension-bridge, but it does. With a certain winning reserve, an innocence as unspoiled as her dazzling good looks, Miss Horne connects. Amen.

Harold Arlen is of considerable assistance in keeping this marathon going. He has hummed out a low, rolling, altogether affecting lullaby in "Little Biscuit," a bittersweet ballad in "Pity the Sunset," and a couple of antically, breezy, engagingly light-footed didoes in "What Good Does It Do?" and "Napoleon."

Conductor Lehman Engel keeps the percussion in the pit popping nicely. And that's about it: two solid sides of LP. Librettists E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saidy haven't even begun to think about supplying their fishermen, pearl-divers, and writhing young ladies with so much as the ghost of a plot: Miss Horne gets to New York, (likely story!), and there you have it.

They have made even less of an effort to slip in a sliver of humor while practically nothing is happening. They may, when the spirit almost moves them, try a little joke about a fellow who saw a car coming at him on the roadway, decided to stand on his rights, and landed on his principles. (They don't mean it, though.) And there is a shadow of satire lurking behind the grass-roofed huts: these folk dream of "an island on the Hudson" where

life is zippy, prefabricated, and so on. (It's sort of "Bali Hai" in reverse.) But this doesn't get us much closer to comedy than remarks about "the mon-goose-race" of existence in New York.

What it does get us—and this, I think, is unfortunate—is no fewer than four E. Y. Harburg lyrics dedicated to preserving the social significance that was so stimulating in the thirties and is so uncomfortable now. Mr. Harburg is, as every one knows, an absolutely dandy lyricist when he is being lyrical: the "crickets doin' nip-ups around the columbine" is in his vein. But there are an enormous number of rhymes involving barbiturates, cyclotrons, Anna Lucasta, and the fact that we may all soon "be fissionable material," and I suspect that the title of one of these forays—"Leave the Atom Alone"—might well have been taken more seriously by the authors.

Jack Cole's incidental dances have flare and vitality, but they are decidedly incidental. Josephine Premice, a fascinating girl who has obviously been put together with twisted pipe-cleaners, raises a decent uproar in a number or two, and Adelaide Hall, Ossie Davis, and young Augustine Rios sing every note handed to them handsomely.

The question is: can you make a whole show out of sheet music?

New York Post

November 1, 1957

TWO on the By RICHARD WATTS Jr. AISLE

Musical Triumph of Lena Horne

What difference does it make that "Jamaica" has an epically feeble book? The exotic new musical play, which opened last night at the Imperial Theater, has the stunning beauty and thrilling voice of Lena Horne, a striking Harold Arlen score, a fast pace, a handsome and colorful production, vivid dance numbers, and a festive air of picturesque brightness. Above all, it makes plentiful use of Miss Horne's exciting ability to give a song style and distinction. It is certain to be a rousing hit, and, despite that libretto, it clearly deserves to be.

To begin with, Miss Horne is probably the most beautiful woman in the world, and it is sheer critical cowardice to stick in that

weaseling word, "probably." But she happens to be considerably more than a great beauty. With her grace, her lithe dignity, her quiet humor, her curious combination of sullenness and sweetness, and her enormous and stirring skill at projecting a song for everything that is in it, if not a little more,

she is one of the incomparable performers of our time. I think I admired her most in a number called "Take It Slow, Joe."

Although she naturally and, it appears, effortlessly dominates "Jamaica," there are other talented performers in the cast. Ricardo Montalban, who made virtually no impression on the musical comedy stage several years ago in "Seventh Heaven," proves to be a leading man of force, charm and romantic attractiveness, and he sings pleasantly. Josephine Premice is a fresh and vastly engaging comedienne, and Ossie Davis, always an actor of quality, is excellent in a character role, while a boy named Augustine Rios remarkably allies charm with self-possession.

The most notable virtue of Mr. Arlen's score is that it captures and holds the mood and spirit of West Indian music without losing its personal style, or becoming either trite or monotonous. I suppose it contains its share of hit numbers, although Miss Horne has a way of making all her songs seem in that category. But what is important is that the music appears to fit perfectly into its narrative and background without being afraid of frank tunefulness. And, thinking it

over, my favorite song is still "Take It Slow, Joe."

Despite my fairly dim view of the book concocted by E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saldy, it has the virtue of not getting seriously in the way. It has to do with the troubled course of a romance between a girl, who wants to leave the island for New York, and a fisherman, who wants to stay where he is, while a hurricane and a rich tempter from Manhattan add to the complications. Fortunately, whenever it tends to get troublesome, a song or a dance number rushes to the rescue. It struck me that Mr. Harburg did better with his lyrics.

The sets by Oliver Smith and the costumes by Miles White have a colorful loveliness that adds enormously to the style and excitement of "Jamaica." Jack Cole has staged the dance numbers with the proper pace, humor and sense of the exotic, and Robert Lewis has directed in a fashion that makes things move along with the proper speed. A number of people have contributed to the festive spirit of the new musical play, but, with all high respect to them, this is chiefly Miss Horne's triumph. She creates an atmosphere of excitement that is inescapable.

Daily Mirror

November 1, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE

'Jamaica' a Smash With Sultry Lena

A hurricane named Lena (Horne) blew into the Imperial Theatre Thursday night, and proceeded to provoke some of the stormiest applause heard hereabouts in quite a spell. She brought in her wake a tempestuous musical titled "Jamaica," from the pens of Harold Arlen, E. Y. Harburg and Fred Saldy.

The boys have fashioned the new arrival to fit the sultry style of the star. Arlen has composed a score that should make the local juke boxes burn out their bearings from overwork. It's studded with at least a half a dozen show stoppers, which you'll be hearing

every morning on your radio at the breakfast table.

AS FOR THE book, let's call it serviceable. It tells a tale of a femme fatale on Pigeon Island in the Caribbean, off the shores of Jamaica. She's pursued by the captain of the local fishermen, but won't wed him unless he'll take her to glamorous New York—about which she's been getting some wrong ideas from tourists and travel mags.

When a hot shot from Harlem, via Memphis and New Orleans, lands to exploit a shark-ridden pearl bed, the ambitious gal is dazzled by his glib talk and free

spending. But when the island is devastated by a big wind, it's the lowly fisherman who turns out to be the hero, and brings about that well-known happy ending.

Miss Horne is a fascinating personality, besides being an eye-ful. She hasn't a big voice, but she uses what she has with superlative skill. To watch her on stage is like following the hypnotic movements of a brilliant flame. She is our idea of a definition for incandescent.

She's alluring, sinuous and magnetic. La Lena can make a mediocre line shimmer with meaning. She can take a song like "Take it Slow, Joe," and make it sizzle so that you wonder if the Fire Department isn't on its way. And that spells artistry, in our language. She's great—real great.

RICARDO MONTALBAN matches the magnificence of Miss Horne's performance with his wonderful impersonation of a mariner who loves his island. He brings heart and engaging bravado to the part. He proves that a Hollywood star can electrify Broadway's boards. We're lucky to have him on loan from the cinema capital.

Adelaide Hall, who was a Lena Horne in her day, stands out as a grandma who interprets the

clouds to please people, knowing her craft is a fake. Do you remember her doing the "Diga Diga-Do" in Lew Leslie's "Blackbirds?" We do, with fond affection. Josephine Premice is delightfully hoydenish as a runner-up to the island belle.

Ossie Davis, one of our favorite troupers, wrings all the humor possible from a little guy who would be a big guy in local officialdom. Augustine Rios is an ingratiating half-pint. Joe Adams is a sharp-shooting promoter to the life. And Erik Rhodes makes the most of his too brief appearances.

Robert Lewis, with an assist from Miss Premice, has staged the song-and-dancer with whirlwind pace. Jack Cole has equipped it with some of his top-shelf dances. Oliver Smith and Miles White have designed breath-taking sets and costumes. Lehman Engel is a human dynamo on the podium.

"Jamaica" bowed into the Imperial with an advance sale of close to \$2,000,000. And no wonder. For, with Skipper Horne at the helm, it spells theatre—for that matter, box-office—magic. It's a grand gale of gala entertainment. In our book, another triumph for producer David Merrick.



New York World-Telegram

The Sun

November 1, 1957

Lena Horne Tops Musical

By FRANK ASTON.

You'd think a show with Lena Horne couldn't miss. "Jamaica," which opened last evening at the Imperial, has her. And "Jamaica" has a mass of other assets. But, in this spectator's opinion, "Jamaica" does miss.



It's a musical, but its music leaves your head pounding with rhythm, not singing a melody. Its comedy may be appropriate to dusky natives of a Caribbean island, but it's not memorable. The production has glitter in depth, indicating no one worried much over expenses; but despite its staging it seems listless. Thinking back on what happened last night, it seems that someone, with the best of intentions, ended up with a grand and glittering goof.

Now that the grumpy opinions have been stated, let's recall some of those assets.

Lena Horne, that supreme super-doll of the supper circuit, was lovely to behold and a joy to hear. Her songs didn't amount to much, but I could think of nothing but silks and spangles and womanliness as she sang "Push the Button," "Take It Slow, Joe," "Ain't It the Truth?" and "Napoleon." Not many beautiful women are funny, but Miss Horne is, even when her material is limp.

Co-Star Impressive.

Opposite her is the ingratiating, spry and contagiously buoyant Ricardo Montalban. He made his chores seem more impressive than they were. Another attractive gentleman is Augustine Rios, who is all of 10 and an accomplished singer and actor.

Other amiable contributors are Josephine Premice, as an earthy opportunist; Adelaide Hall, as a sort of singing character actress; Ossie Davis, for broad laughs; and Joe Adams, touching lightly on the badness of a New York sharpie.

The story tells of life on a Caribbean island where the leading belle is willing to give her all to live in New York where she would do no more than "push the button"; where a hurricane so savage it suggests an atomic blast destroys all food; and where the belle

realizes that true love is as sweet on her little isle as on that "island in the Hudson."

Observing the Natives.

The audience spends a couple of hours watching the natives bounding about in brown grace, hearing them sing, and listening to the humor of what is supposed to

be their childlike concept of government, mushroom clouds, fine clothes, fidelity, infidelity, love and John Foster Dulles.

That's about as far as I can go in the way of alleged assets. Thank goodness for that Horne girl.

"The Square Root of Wonderful"

Journal NEW YORK American

October 31, 1957

Diffuse Doubletalk Adds Up to Big O

By JOHN McCLAIN

FROM the moment, several months ago, when it was announced that Carson McCullers had written a new play called "The Square Root of Wonderful" I began speculating privately about its probable message. My conjectures didn't get me anywhere in particular, but neither did the play itself which opened last night at the National Theatre.

It is difficult to understand how the lady who wrote "The Member of the Wedding" could have drifted into such diffuse doubletalk.

This play is as pretentious

and precious as its title, and as far as I'm concerned the three sides of the isosceles triangle add up to the square root of zero. It's a pity, too,

because a lot of good people are involved.

In All Directions

As we all know, Miss McCullers can write a sprightly and often memorable line; she can bring characters to life, and she has an acceptable sense of the dramatic. But in "The Square Root" it seems to me that she has spun off in all directions—the plot is implaus-

"THE SQUARE ROOT OF WONDERFUL"

Play in three acts by Carson McCullers; staged by George Keathley; settings and lighting by Jo Mielzner; costumes by Noel Taylor; presented by Saint Subber and Figaro, Inc., at the National Theatre, October 30, 1957. The cast: Paris Lovejoy... Kevin Coughlin Mollie Lovejoy... Anne Baxter John Tucker... Philip Abbott Lorena Lovejoy... Martine Bartlett Mother Lovejoy... Jean Dixon Philip Lovejoy... William Smithers Joey Barnes... Kippy Campbell

ible, the people are grotesque, and there are many times when we wonder whether we're laughing with, or at, the players.

Her story here concerns a young divorcee (for some reason deeply Southern) living with her son and ex-mother-in-law on a farm in Rockland County, N. Y.

An acceptable young architect comes over the horizon.

"The Square Root of Wonderful"—continued

moves into the guest cottage, and shortly thereafter the drunken ex-husband is sprung from a sanatorium and also settles down on the premises. He still needs his wife, and her heart is enormous, so we have our triangle.

It is impossible to estimate the value of the performers on the basis of last night's misfortune. Anne Baxter, who has many times proven her

merit as an actress, is saddled with the thickest cornpone accent since Aunt Jemima and is otherwise obliged to utter some of the strangest proclamations this side of the laughing academy. She is, however, extremely decorative.

Unbelievable Part

Jean Dixon, as the mother-in-law, is her enormously

capable self, but again her part is unbelievable. Philip Abbott comes closest to reality as the visitor, but William Smithers, in the role of the former husband, is required to rattle the rafters with his edgy delivery.

In his big finale he beats a grandfather's clock to death with his bare fists, which will give you a rough idea. Real rugged, this boy.

Kevin Coughlin, a sprout, is of course excellent as Miss Baxter's son; and Martine Bartlett, in the unglamorous role of the sister-in-law, has a brief moment of splendor.

"The Square Root of Wonderful" is infinitely less than that. Miss McCullers and the players will go on to better things.

The New York Times

October 31, 1957

Theatre: 'Square Root'

Mrs. McCullers' Play Opens at National

By BROOKS ATKINSON

AFTER "The Member of the Wedding" Carson McCullers' second play seems commonplace.

It is called "The Square Root of Wonderful" (another magic phrase) and it opened at the National last evening. Labeled "a love story," it concerns a young woman who has been twice divorced from an irascible, half-mad writer and who has fallen in love with an architect. It is set in Rockland County, which Mrs. McCullers obviously regards as plausible territory.

In fiction and in her memorable play of seven years

ago, Mrs. McCullers is a stylist who evokes strange images from ordinary situations. Everything looks homely and familiar, but Mrs. McCullers instinctively incantates it as if it belonged to another world.

There is some suggestion of the bizarre in "The Square Root of Wonderful." Mollie Lovejoy, the divorced woman, is fey and naive. Her ex-husband is abnormally precious as a writer. And his tyrannical mother, from the South, is obsessed with all sorts of illusions about his genius and odd ideas about what is proper in good society.

Especially at the end, there are passages of the precise though allusive prose with which Mrs. McCullers can weave golden sentiments

and wistful dreams out of common material. But most of "The Square Root of Wonderful" remains earthbound. The characters are hardly distinguishable from inhabitants of the conventional comedy of manners. What they say to one another belongs to the social rather than the poetic world. Very little of Mrs. McCullers' odd genius has gotten into the fabric of this frail, delicate, though listless, play.

Everything has been done to make it look and sound beguiling on the stage. Jo Mielziner has set it attractively inside a Rockland County farmhouse adapted to the tastes of a modern family. Serving as director, George Keathley has provided a neat, light, amiable performance, punctuated with a few moments of tension and temper.

Anne Baxter, as sweet-looking as ice cream and peach pie, plays the part of the naive woman with charm and good humor. As the overbearing mother from the South,

Jean Dixon has returned to the theatre with one of those simple and lucid performances that have a delightfully wry interior. Martine Bartlett plays the part of a rather genial spinster with extraordinary originality—the surface owl-like, the spirit gay.

In the part of the angry intellectual, William Smithers is admirable, with a surly mask on a hopeless nature. Philip Abbott, as the young architect, gives a quiet, pleasant performance in a character that is not really developed in the writing. And there is a likable performance by Kevin Coughlin as a boy old enough to be suspicious of adults.

Perhaps the performance as a whole could have more sorcery in it. But the basic flaw is probably the lifelessness of the characters and the flatness of most of the writing. Mrs. McCullers has not been able to impart to this love story the other-worldliness of her best writing. The title—"The Square Root of Wonderful"—is more characteristic of her than the play that goes with it.

Daily Mirror

October 31, 1957

ROBERT COLEMAN'S THEATRE:

'Square Root' Less Than Wonderful

Carson McCullers has the ability to catch the ring of regional speech. At times, she can make shallow people sound almost poetic. Such is her gift for creating moods that she often forgets to string them on better than a tenuous thread of action. And that about sums up her latest play, "The Square Root of Wonderful."

In it Mrs. McCullers tells of a simple Georgia girl who makes the mistake of marrying into a family with money and pretensions. Her mother-in-law is accurately described by her own

son as "a babbling old horror." She ruins her dowdy daughter's marital chances, and spoils her wayward boy by insisting that he's a genius.

THE TRUTH is that he's a weakling, a scribbler capable of turning out but one success for the arty set, and even that sprang from his foolish mama's reminiscences rather than inspiration. He's a mean man to live with because he hates himself, and humiliates those around him.

His long-suffering spouse always takes him back, after he's

left her for flings or sojourns in private sanitariums, because she believes he needs her. And there's their teen-age son to consider. But when she accidentally meets a decent architect who is genuinely fond of her, she gathers the strength to break with the phony genius, and try to find some happiness for herself.

The square root of wonderful, incidentally, is love. Unfortunately, this "love story" is something less than wonderful, though it has amusing, human and touching moments.

Some of the writing is sensitive and tender, and some of it embarrassing in its stiffness.

The result is an odd combination of the idealistic and romantic along with the earthy and brutal.

Producers Saint Subber and Figaro, Inc., have come up with an excellent cast to show off the new tenant of the National Theatre at its best. Jean Dixon dominates the evening with her fascinating portrait of an acid-tongued, garrulous and overbearing Southern matriarch, who constantly reminds those about her that she's "well-heeled"—not "rich," mind you, for that's vulgar.

ANNE BAXTER, who's putting her movie rep on the line, etches the searching, well-meaning wife with sincerity. She has yet to learn a thing or two about stage movement, the use of hands and arms to match emotions. Martine Bartlett is eminently right as a brow-beaten spinster who can dream and yet be a realist about her kin.

Philip Abbott, as the architect; William Smithers, as the self-centered husband; and Kevin Coughlin, as his son, who tries to understand what's going on in the grown-up world around him, also make helpful contributions under George Keathley's direction.

Make no mistake about it, Miss McCullers is a writer of quality, whether it be for the printed page or the stage. We, for one, shall never forget her compelling, heart-breaking "Member of the Wedding."

As for "The Square Root of Wonderful," it boasts flashes of beauty, embedded in a basis of the fumbling and sordid. It starts to soar like a bird that must fly, but too seldom gets off the ground. Perhaps we expected too much from this fine artist. Anyway, we were disappointed.



New York World-Telegram
and
The Sun

October 31, 1957

'Square Root' Is Like Magic

By FRANK ASTON.

"The Square Root of Wonderful," which opened at the National last evening, is not nearly so abstract as the title suggests. As the author, Carson McCul-



lers, figures it, the square root of is humiliation, and humiliation can kill a person truly in love may be lifted from despair, or brought to a needed self-confidence, or shown the beauty that waits along some of life's unexpected byways. And here's one reporter who believes Mrs. McCullers has written a sturdy entertainment.

Mrs. McCullers' plot presents an animalistic, bewildered young mother who has twice divorced the eccentric father of her

son and is about to marry an understanding architect. Mixed into the situation are the woman's addled mother-in-law, who fancies herself a Georgia aristocrat, and a sister-in-law, who is frankly suffering from the abstinence imposed by spinsterhood. Onto the scene from a sanitarium stalks the ex-husband to demand a third marriage and the privileges of wedlock while awaiting the parson. The young mother, sensualist that she is, can't understand why her existence should be such a torment.

Told baldly like that, Mrs. McCullers' tale sounds inane. But by building one stern scene on another she makes the proceedings ring with reality. Yet she is always watching for opportunities to create laughter.

It's ironic, laughter touched with bitterness. The young mother, telling why she obtained the divorces, says she didn't object to her husband's "polygamy" but couldn't stand it when he accused her of using clichés. The mother-in-law prattles that it's more fun to count dollars than thoughts, that happiness consists of sad memories, that a debutante should be vivacious at a ball but be careful not to regurgitate.

But those are minor touches. What counts is the stack of ugly scenes: The loud denunciation of the mother by her psychotic son, the outburst of sexual frenzy by the madman, the spinster's halting revelation of frustration. It all moves toward the square root under George Keathley's firm direction, arriving there a little wordily in the final scene, but quite bravely.

Anne Baxter returns to the stage in triumph as the divorcee. And there should be praise for Jean Dixon's silly mother, Philip Abbott's lover, William Smithers' lunatic, Martine Bartlett's old maid, and Kevin Coughlin as the son.

Jo Mielziner's Rockland County living room, look-

ing out on apple blossoms, is enough to make computing seem almost worthwhile.

New York Post

October 31, 1957

TWO on the AISLE

By RICHARD
WATTS Jr.

The New Carson McCullers Play

"The Square Root of Wonderful" seems to me a remarkably disturbing play. Carson McCullers' "love story," as she describes it, is interestingly written, often freshly observed, unquestionably intelligent, frequently striking in its approach, and at times possesses a welcome air of individuality.

Yet, as it was presented last night at the National Theater with an excellent cast, it only occasionally came to proper dramatic focus, and the final result was, though certainly far from boring, of but intermittently effective emotional forcefulness.

One of the curious and rather upsetting things about it is that it so often appears on the verge of becoming a satirical paraphrase of "The Glass Menagerie." Although its setting is upstate

New York, most of its characters are Southerners, and three of them are a garrulous and dominating mother, a poisonous ex-belle, whose husband had fled from her in understandable alarm, and her two children, a bitter, self-torturing son and a shy, pathetically lonely spinster of a daughter. They clearly come from the Tennessee Williams country.

The Mother

In addition to the resemblance she bears to the unforgettable old lady of "The Glass Menagerie," the mother, who is an important figure in "The Square Root of Wonderful," presents another disturbing aspect. It was my impression that Miss McCullers never quite made up her mind what to do with her. There are times when she seems entirely malicious satire, occasionally to the point of burlesque, and yet at others she appears, while still bitingly drawn, a realistic portrait. I thought this resulted in a confusion not to be blamed on the performance.

The other important characters are far more believably set down. The son, a tormented writer, driven to drink by his inability to repeat his youthful success, and to suicidal self-hatred by distaste for his own conduct, is a credible figure of some subtlety. Equally credible, and decidedly touching, is the shy daughter, with her occasional moments of candid insight, while the heroine, twice married to and separated from the unhappy writer, is also an interesting figure, with her clichés, her immaturity, and her mixture of hate and love for her husband.

The Story

The play deals in large part with the child wife's intermittent efforts to break with her impossible spouse and go off with an understanding young architect who loves her. As in her far more successful earlier play, "The Member of the Wedding," Miss McCullers is concerned with depicting the problems of a girl striving toward maturity, but, while there is a larger amount of plot in "The Square Root of Wonderful," the dramatic effectiveness is slighter. Nevertheless, the gift for fresh and sympathetic observation of character is still there.

Anne Baxter, back from a lengthy sojourn in the movies, plays the young wife honestly and well. Despite a role that shifts between satire and realism, Jean Dixon plays the mother with her usual unflinching skill, while William Smithers, as the embittered husband, and Philip Abbott, as the architect, are excellent. Most effective of all, though, is Martine Bartlett, who portrays the neglected daughter beautifully. As usual, Jo Mielziner's set is helpful. There is so much that is striking about Miss McCullers' play that I'm especially sorry it doesn't quite come off dramatically.